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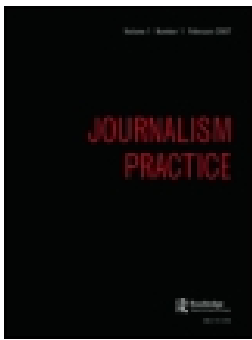
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Social Media in Ecuador: Impact on Journalism Practice and Citizens' Understanding of Public Politics

Manuel Goyanes^{a,b}, Paulo Carlos López-López^c and Márton Demeter^d

^aDepartment of Communication, Carlos III University, Madrid, Spain; ^bDemocracy Research Unit (DRU), Political Science, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain; ^cDepartment of Political Science, Santiago de Compostela University, Santiago de Compostela, Spain; ^dDepartment of Communication, National University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

The omnipresence and ubiquitous nature of online news on social media has challenged the traditional news production process of most news organizations worldwide. However, most research on this topic has dealt with the impact of social networks on global North societies. In this article, drawing upon a world-systemic approach, we focus on how social media transforms journalism practice in Ecuador and explore its main influences on how journalists make sense of and evaluate their professional roles. Based on interviews with 40 Ecuadorian journalists having a variety of backgrounds and levels of experience, we show how social media affects journalists' professional practices, conceptualizing these influences as systemic and antisystemic phenomena. The most important systemic consequences of social media are related to the immediate nature of news, the changing identity of journalists and the growing wave of sensationalism, while the most important antisystemic feature is the nourishing of an indigenous orientation whereby Ecuadorian journalists favor their own rhetorical and narrative traditions against global (central) mores.

KEYWORDS

Journalism; Ecuador; Latin America; social media; journalism culture; world-system

Introduction

Since the emergence of the Internet, digital journalism has undergone a significant transformation, as a result of a myriad of organizational, industrial and technological challenges that have affected the news business (Deuze and Witschge 2018). Readers' consumption patterns have changed dramatically as well (Goyanes 2019), due to the popularization of social media platforms and their growing relevance in news sharing, dissemination and discussion (Swart, Peters, and Broersma 2018). According to recent market research, most people obtain news on social media, even though many have concerns about its accuracy (Matsa and Shearer 2018). News-workers have also adapted their professional skills to the demanding digital realm, in which the immediacy and omnipresence of news on social media have become the benchmark of the business (Hermida 2010). In this context, a growing number of media scholars are concerned about the potentially

distorted effects that social media might have on journalistic practice and thus on citizens' understanding of current events and politics. However, extant research focused mostly on global North communities (Fletcher and Nielsen 2019; Shehata and Strömbäck 2018), prevents us from gleaning more evidence on how technological revolutions like the Internet or social media affect journalism practices beyond the Western world.

This article explores how journalists in Ecuador are using social media platforms and how, in turn, they are changing journalistic practices. Through 40 in-depth interviews with news-workers from different regional and national news organizations, we try to elucidate how journalists are transforming journalism and are transformed by the consolidation of social media platforms for professional duties. We employed the world-systems theory as benchmark framework in order to position and compare our observations with the theoretical insights proposed by central Euro-American scholarships. Drawing upon this perspective, we also identify both systemic (global) and antisystemic (resistant) processes whereby Ecuadorian journalist make sense of their professional roles. Our findings first describe the professional culture of Ecuadorian journalism in a world-systemic framework, reflecting upon its nature and main idiosyncratic features. We also empirically illustrate the heightened role of immediacy on social media platforms to articulate the news production process of most news organizations, giving rise to a new wave of sensationalism, while reinforcing the traditional role of journalists as watchdogs. This article contributes to the budding literature on de-Westernization in communication sciences (Waisbord 2019), providing an inductive angle that displays both pull and push effects in the context of the globalization of journalism.

Latin America and Ecuador in the World-System

As a consequence of a growingly globalized world, social subsystems that have thus far been investigated on a national or regional level should be analyzed with respect to global power relations (Demeter 2019). As Chase-Dunn puts it (1999), our societal fields (i.e., economy, politics, culture or communication) are globally interconnected in a way that all participants have their specific power position. The founding father of the world-systemic perspective, Immanuel Wallerstein argues (2004), that these societal realities are not separate from the dynamics of the overall world-system, but rather play essential parts in its operation. Galtung (1971) even assumes that these subsystems—including education, popular culture and media industry—help to maintain the hegemony of the Euro-American center through the circulation of central values and professional culture. As a branch of world-systems analysis, world polity research specifically investigates the role of culturally oriented organizational and institutional processes (Cole 2017; Meyer et al. 1997). This tradition states that different—collective or individual—participants in the world-system are “embedded in and shaped by a global cultural, social, and political environment, resulting in a great deal of decoupled isomorphism among them” (Cole 2017, 86).

In the case of journalism studies, this feature can be illustrated in at least three established traditions. First, as we have already mentioned, extant research on journalism practices and professional standards mostly deal with central regions in terms of both theoretical and empirical approaches (Antunovic, Parsons, and Cooke 2018; Costera Meijer and Groot Kormelink 2015; Hermida 2010). Second, Western types of media

structure and professional practices are usually considered as international or even as ideal implementations of professional journalistic standards (Hallin and Mancini 2004). Third, even if media systems beyond the Western world are considered (Mihelj and Huxtable 2018), they are analyzed from a Western central point of view, while peripheral perspectives or decolonized epistemologies are usually ignored (Hallin and Mancini 2012). Thus, an inductive analysis of the professional standards of peripheral regions (like Ecuador) is essential, as it might hint at potential directions to counteract and challenge established discourses on journalism practices and professional role models established in the West.

According to Wallerstein, the world-system is an international and multicultural network in which different necessities—money, labor power, energy, knowledge, information and so on—flow (Wallerstein 1974a, 1974b, 1979). The world-system is such that it includes different nations with different cultures, languages, norms, institutions and values. Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997b) defines world-systems as “intersocietal networks in which the interactions (e.g., trade, warfare, intermarriage, information) are important for the reproduction of the internal structures of the composite units and importantly affect changes that occur in these local structures” (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997b, 403). From our point of view, the most important feature of the world-system is that it tends to develop a typical core–periphery (Wallerstein 1979) or core semiperiphery structure (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997b). Accordingly, we must first determine the systemic position of our analyzed region in order to be able to use a global perspective.

In Hall and Chase-Dunn’s generalized model (2006), Latin America is an important example of semi-peripheries. According to the hypothesis of semiperipheral development, transformational changes are mainly brought about by the actions of individuals and organizations within polities that are semiperipheral relative to the other polities in the same system (Chase-Dunn and Morasin 2013). Semiperipheral regions are relevant in the understanding of the world-system’s operation since, as mediating agents, they produce both systemic acts whereby they tend to move along with the center, and anti-systemic counter-movements (Robinson 2008) through which they try to resist central influence (Wallerstein 1990). According to both empirical measurements (Kentor 2000, 2008) and historical analysis (Frank 1967; Mahoney 2012), Latin America counts as a semi-periphery in the world-system, meaning that such countries share important semi-peripheral commonalities including low to middle GDP per capita, high to moderate economic dependence, indigenous rebellions, anti-colonial struggles for independence and autonomy, foreign intervention, and so on (Galeano 1987).

The accurate position of a given country in the world-system can be determined by a matrix that deals with both geopolitical position and development (Kentor 2008), and systemic attitude (Chase-Dunn and Morasin 2013). Based on the variables that have been developed by Kentor (2000, 2008), Chase-Dunn and Morasin (2013) considered Ecuador as a peripheral country, as opposed with other, more developed Latin-American nations such as Brazil or Mexico, generally considered as semi-peripheral regions. Peripherality here refers to the geopolitical and developmental position of Ecuador. Regarding systemic attitudes through which peripheral regions relate to the center, in Latin America, there are non-progressive countries that sympathize with neoliberal values, Western ideologies and where social welfare measures are not a high priority of state policy. Typical examples are Colombia and Mexico. Progressive countries could be both reformist or antisystemic (Smith and Wiest 2012). An antisystemic regime, according to Wallerstein (1990) argues

that neither liberty nor equality is possible under the current world-system, so in order to be free and equal, the system should be changed. Reformists are less radical, since besides being internally progressive, they do not oppose international relations and international free trade policies. Based on a historical/political analysis, Chase-Dunn and Morasin (2013) considered Argentina and Brazil as progressive, reformist countries, while seeing Ecuador, Bolivia, Venezuela and Cuba as progressive and also antisystemic countries. Thus, in a world-systemic matrix, Ecuador might be viewed as a peripheral antisystemic country.

Social Media and Journalism in Ecuador

Ecuadorian journalism is determined by the state of private media companies in the country, with four main characteristics (Becerra 2014): the absence of a concept of public service in the scope of private media; the existence of big media conglomerates that affect content diversity (Mastrini and Becerra 2007); intra-state interactions where cities establish a center/periphery relationship with the rest of the country; and finally, a media system that has evolved under low regulation, but under a great degree of control by governments and business owners (Fox and Waisbord 2002). Regarding the latter, in 2008, Ecuador passed a new constitutional document whose implementation progressively reinforced state action, leading to political, economic, social and even media changes. Journalism has been subjected to more significant interference through new laws and regulations with respect to media licensing, radio frequencies, content, and the increase in state-owned media companies, as well as community media (Oller Alonso and Chavero Ramírez 2014). In a study about the situation of journalism in Latin America (Saldaña and Mourao 2018), findings indicate that the main professional challenges facing Ecuadorian journalists are connected with political and economic pressure, censorship or lack of transparency, corruption and crime.

In relation to Ecuadorian professional profiles, more than two thirds of news-workers are male, with a university degree (66.3% hold a bachelor's degree, 11.3% have a master's degree, and 2.5% a doctorate), and an average age of 35 years (Oller Alonso et al. 2016). This figure shows a paucity of resistance to digital transformations, as most of them are digital natives. In fact, although a high percentage of Ecuadorian journalists have a bachelor's degree (González Córdova 2016), they are generally unhappy with the training they have received. This is mainly due to the disparity between the skills learned in the classroom and those actually required for the profession (Atala, Chéné, and Panamá 2017). In addition, according to Odriozola Chené, Aguirre Mayorga, and Bernal Suárez (2016), Facebook is the most popular channel among journalists (68%), followed by Twitter (64%).

Problem Statement and Research Questions

Regarding world-systemic attitudes, we can assume that both pull and push effects play important roles among journalists in Ecuador. First, there should be systemic movements that pull the journalistic culture towards central (Western) values, attitudes and policies. An important feature of the pro-Western attitude is a sort of inferiority complex whereby Ecuadorian media may prefer to copy Western program formats, while a clear identity of Ecuadorian media is still missing (Punín-Larrea, Martínez, and Rencoret 2014).

Another pro-systemic dynamic of the Ecuadorian media might be related to the growing importance of the Internet and social media sites, both products of the West (Jordan 2013). Thus, for every world region of the global South (Rigg 2007), the penetration of the Internet and the popularity of social media go hand in hand with the dissemination of Western cultural values (Thomas-Slayter 2003).

Regarding push effects, globalization has also given birth to anti-globalization and anti-systemic movements, especially in more or less progressive parts of the global South (Braveboy-Wagner 2009). Thus, an anti-Western attitude may also be presumed amongst journalists in Ecuador or, at least, we can expect an ambivalent position towards Western journalistic values and traditions. As Thomas-Slayter (2003) puts it, regions of the global South rightly fear some level of cultural annihilation from the center and, as a consequence, there are widespread waves of emancipation, self-respect and self-determination. On the other hand, there is also a desire to espouse the Western way of life with cell phones, fast Internet, science and technology, leading to a situation of conflicting desires to both reject and embrace Westernization, and one which is characteristic of the global South (Thomas-Slayter 2003). Since in Ecuador, the vast majority of journalists are male, under 40 and have a university degree in communications or journalism (Oller Alonso et al. 2016) we can assume that they have a somewhat higher degree of commitment to international (central) values that would balance their antisystemic attitudes (Chase-Dunn and Morasin 2013). Based on our theoretical considerations and the position that Ecuador holds in the world-system, we formulated our research questions as follows:

RQ1: Which push (systemic) and pull (antisystemic) attitudes are characteristic of the professional practices of Ecuadorian journalists?

RQ2: What effect has the emergence of social media platforms had on the balance between systemic and antisystemic attitudes of Ecuadorian journalists?

Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with 40 Ecuadorian journalists. These semi-structured interviews were carried out between November and March 2019, all of them face-to-face. We used purposive sampling, specifically maximum variety sampling. Following Patton (2002), journalists were chosen to reflect a large diversity in information-rich cases relevant to the research interest: we included in the sample journalists from different regional/national/local newspapers, with different cohorts of ages, experiences, responsibilities, sections and gender. At the time of the interview, participants worked for news providers such as *Últimas Noticias*, *El Norte*, *El Tiempo*, *La Hora*, *Extra*, *El Universo*, etc. Our respondents thus represent a great heterogeneity in their profiles. The interviews were transcribed by the second author and later codified and analyzed by the first. The final sample represented a wide range of demographic data and work profiles. Fifty-five per cent of our final sample were men, while forty-five per cent were women. The anonymity of interviewees was guaranteed and we only provide their position (editor, society journalist, sport journalist, etc.), and the geographical reach of their news organization (L = Local; R = Regional; N = National).

The interview guide addressed three topic areas. The first part concerned participants' perceptions of the effects of social media on journalism practice. Questions

addressed how participants use social media in relation to their daily work routines and news production process, emphasizing also how they see social platforms to be transforming news diffusion. The second part concerned the role of social media platforms in modifying or challenging journalist identities and professional skills, assessing the potential transformations in relation to previous journalism work. Finally, the third part focused on how social media affects their relationship with readers, as well as strategies to foster interactivity and dialogue, and a general assessment of such interactions.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim following transcription rules proposed by Dresing and Schmieder (2013). We conducted a thematic analysis, which posits “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke 2006, 79). We followed the six-phase analytic procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) that allows for the systematization and transparency of the coding and analysis process. Codes and thematic maps were discussed with two independent researchers, which then informed the refinement of themes, their definition and naming. Thematic analysis allowed us to identify shared patterns across the statements of various interviewees, centered around our three research interests, while remaining open to identifying other emerging themes. In the next section, we discuss the key findings.

Results

Contextual Factors: Crisis, Politics, History and References

As in many other countries in both the global North and South, journalism in Ecuador is suffering from a severe economic and financial crisis, a decline in print newspapers and the inability of most news organizations to monetize online news. These features are, to a great degree, systemic, due to the interconnectedness of international financial networks and global markets. Thus, economic crises affect both the center and the dependent peripheries (Abreu, Alves, and Gulamhussen 2019). “We are in a deep crisis, looking for certainty and new ways of monetizing digital content”, comments a sports coordinator (L7). This financial crisis resonates in all news organizations across Ecuador, and often prevents journalists from being promoted. As a society journalist points out: “with the growing media crisis, the professional growth of many journalists has stagnated. At this time, it is no longer possible to be promoted to new positions” (N26). Therefore, not only financial but also technological transformations in digital journalism have undeniably affected journalists’ working conditions, in a context where print newspapers are no longer the cash cows they used to be—a phenomenon which is fully global, and thus systemic.

When assessing the overall situation of the profession in Latin America in general and Ecuador in particular and its relationship with politics, we found contradictory testimonies. For instance, an experienced editor stated:

You have to analyze specific cases, countries that are politically threatened like Venezuela, Nicaragua and Honduras, which have dictatorial governments where you are persecuted for writing certain news. With the exception of these, I believe that the rest may still have some problems relating to access to information, but in terms of freedom of expression, there is a good atmosphere. (R13)

However, for many others, the relationship between journalism and politics is critical, due to the limited access to political sources, the restrictive interpretation of freedom of speech, and the politically-motivated manipulation of content.

Very beaten [journalism], there are a lot of restrictions, there is no freedom of expression, you have to always take special care in what you say or write, you cannot use all the information you have. (L1)

I believe that it is still limited by not being able to access sources, sometimes the government tricks you, journalists are persecuted, especially the daily *La Hora*. Freedom of the press is still lacking, even access to information is not complete. (R25)

In addition, in a more general context, and also stemming from the restricted view of the freedom of speech, a society journalist working for *El Comercio* believes that journalism is in a constant struggle due to its traditional relationship with violence: “We continue to struggle on a daily basis against the death of journalists, as happened with our brothers in *El Comercio*. In Mexico, to date, 13 journalists have died, and this is a reality to which we are exposed.” (N40) However, despite these challenges, many participants acknowledge that journalism in Latin America has a distinctive imprint that make it different from other cultures. This imprint is translated into the spirit of their chronicles, the emotions transmitted and the characters created:

I think it is a journalism of character, which seeks to provoke peoples’ interest and reach their emotions. (N27)

In Latin America, there is also a long tradition of great chroniclers. I think that, even with fewer economic resources, Latin American journalism has achieved high levels of quality in many cases. (L13)

According to our testimonies, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico are arguably the three most important references in shaping Ecuadorian journalism practice. This phenomenon is fully consistent with Chase-Dunn and Hall’s model on semiperipheral development (1997a). According to this model, relatively coherent world regions at the periphery tend to elevate their own centers that become role models for the other countries. With this, the formerly peripheral new centers of those world regions become semi-peripheries in a world-systemic context. These new centers could play an important role when it comes to antisystemic movements in which the periphery refuses to automatically follow central (Western) ideas and values (Chase-Dunn 1999). The coordinator of a newspaper website puts it in the following terms:

I think the most prominent countries are Argentina, Colombia and Mexico, since they have had schools of journalism for many years and they are the clearest examples of a journalism that has been evolving, having a huge impact on our views. (R26)

Echoing this view, an economic news-worker states: “I can say that the influences we have received from Colombia and Argentina are the most significant.” (N39) Beyond traditional journalism schools, certain crucial references and masters of the craft shape Ecuadorian perspectives on journalism practice. García Márquez and Vargas Llosa are arguably the ones cited most referenced often, as illustrated by the following respondents:

We have Nobel prize winners who were journalists, such as García Márquez and Vargas Llosa. There are very good ones, like the Argentinian chronicler who is in Spain, Martín Caparrós. They are the trailblazers and we follow them. (N28)

There is a huge school of journalism that Gabriel García Márquez started and, since him, much effort has been put into keeping this tradition in different countries such as Colombia, Chile and Ecuador. If you look at our news pieces, we continue this tradition, giving a special focus to local news and folkloric nationalism, unlike European journalism which is much colder, rougher ... (N29)

Immediate News on Social Media and Its Implications for Journalistic Practice

According to our findings, in line with global processes fueled by the penetration of the Internet in the news industry (Kim, Chen, and De Zúñiga 2013), social media has severely affected the news production process of Ecuadorian journalists. We conceptualize these changes and transformations as being the product of *news immediacy*. Specifically, news immediacy refers to journalists' sense making of news on social media and their fundamental compulsion to transmit and disseminate news as soon as possible. A local journalist puts it in the following terms: "Now everything is much faster, everything needs to be fast and immediate when using social media." (L12) Echoing this perspective, an economics journalist adds: "news in social media is almost immediate. So journalists of different news outlets have to dip into these issues and create stories about them. Our survival depends on that." (N38) Therefore, immediacy not only frames journalists' discourse on social media for news, but is also crucial to the survival of most news organizations in the digital realm. This phenomenon is certainly the consequence of a central pull effect, since the Internet in general, and social media in particular—as products of the Western center—are deliberately developed in order to be international, and are based on central ideas on the functioning of the neoliberal global market (Prasad 2006). Among others, immediacy is definitely part of twenty-first century Western culture (Kaizen 2016). By adopting the demands of immediacy, Ecuadorian journalists unwillingly adopt central values as well.

In addition, beyond the traditional production process of news, digital content on social media also challenges the way in which news is conceived. An international journalist expresses it in the following terms: "People want to know straight away what is happening and that also transforms the way you write." (N30) A print newspaper coordinator introduced the idea that news "capsules" disseminated in social media prevent many readers from getting the big picture:

social media affects journalism and I perceive it in its immediacy. We have mistakenly accustomed the public to believe that social media is the news. However, we did not explain the public that they need to take the next step, to reflect, to analyze. (L2)

Likewise, the immediate nature of news on social media encourages many people to publish and share non-verified content. This triggers the growing dissemination of fake news and misinformation. "Now it is much easier to be informed and many people may feel they are journalists, disseminating a lot of non-verified information", a print journalist laments (N31). Echoing this opinion, a local journalist suggests: "now every citizen can provide information, triggering problems of veracity" (L12). An online newspaper coordinator provides a dramatic example of the potential damage caused by fake news in Ecuador:

In the city of Quevedo a few years ago there was a case of a kidnapped child. A man was accused of the crime and sent to prison, and later it was discovered that the man had been

joking. Disinformation from social media was the cause, because a video from a digital newspaper had gone viral and that was where all this false information had come from. (N32)

Throughout our interviews, most of our respondents were very concerned about the impact of fake news on citizens' understanding of public affairs and politics. An editor of a national newspaper provides significant data of the relevance and reach of fake news on social media:

Social media has affected us with fake news and creating disinformation. We ran an analysis last week and, of 100% of what was published on social media, only 10% was verified information, that is, 90% is false information which perhaps simulates newspaper output. (N33)

In this uncertain environment, in which the boundaries of professional identities are challenged, many of our respondents seem to believe that they are crucial to prevent fake news, serving as an antidote to the growing disinformation on social media. A society coordinator expresses it in the following terms: "We are in a privileged position as gatekeepers. We need to confirm the information we publish. Many readers expect information in media outlets to be confirmed." (R20) Our testimonies, in general, addressed the tactics that news organizations usually follow to fight fake news and the growing misinformation on social media. These tactics are exemplified by a local journalist: "In our newspaper, we first plan the topics, search for the sources, do the fieldwork, write as plainly as possible for the Internet and then develop the topic more thoroughly in the print newspaper." (L8) In order to capture readers' attention in social media and to be the first to publish a piece of news, many of our respondents acknowledge that they become more sensationalistic. The editor of a national newspaper explains: "We have been forced by social media to be faster in what we publish, to be more sensationalistic. But sensationalism also makes people return to the print newspaper in search of truth." (N34) Therefore, according to this editor, sensationalism is a technique for disseminating news on social media that aims to generate print traffic.

Print Newspapers, Online Newspapers and Social Media

For most of our participants, the dissemination of news has entered a new era in which immediacy and the visual nature of content permeate the new discourses on digital journalism. In this realm, what was usual becomes obsolete, while social media platforms are established as the central domains for news dissemination, turning micro-messages into a fundamental mode of news production. A society journalist explains it in the following terms:

Our route is the following one: Facebook, Twitter, web and print newspaper. We no longer think about the big news. Now immediacy makes you work from the micro to the macro. The important thing is to be on Twitter, and then we see what we publish in the print newspaper. (N26)

The traditional Ecuadorian approach was to think in terms of the print newspaper first, but with the emergence of social media, our testimonies emphasized the opposite. An economic journalist noted:

Before, we thought in terms of starting from the print newspaper and moving towards the digital one. Now we think from digital to print, because the first thing you need to decide

is what we are going to put on Facebook, on Twitter, on the web, and then publish this piece of news in the print newspaper with a deeper angle. (N37)

All of our interviewees refer to the preponderance of the digital newspaper over the print one and the tactics outlined previously: longer and more in-depth news in the print newspaper, and short, visual and high-impact pieces for digital platforms.

Before, we wrote for the print paper, more in-depth news and more facts. Now we first think about the headline and the number of characters to post the information on social media. Then we develop the same piece of news in the print newspaper. (N37)

We constantly send important news to social media tweets or posts, usually with attractive photographs and flashy headlines, accompanied with humor whenever possible. (R22)

Effects of Social Media on Journalists' Professional Profiles

Most of our respondents believe that social media in particular and digital journalism in general have affected their identities and professional profiles. An economics journalist provides an insightful example:

The main change is that it [digital journalism] has made us speed up. Now we need to have different visions and narratives. In addition, we not only need to write well, but also we need to have some notions of photography and television. We are in a multi-platform environment and we need to be all-terrain professionals. (L10)

Echoing this perspective, a national journalist acknowledges:

With the new technologies, journalists are expected to write for newspapers, appear on radio programs, update social networks, send videos, and report live over the phone. Of course, newsrooms have been transformed, and it has been a hazardous generational transformation. (N39)

Social media platforms have not only challenged the news production process and news dissemination strategies of Ecuadorian newspapers, but have also affected the hiring process:

Recently we had to hire a journalist and we did not even post it on a hiring platform. I published the position on my Facebook account and I got 100 CVs from people who have worked for 20 years in journalism. But the profile we are looking for is different. We are looking for a digital journalist who knows how to use digital tools, who is a connoisseur of social media, who can manage data and who knows how to write well. (R12)

Despite social transformations in the above-mentioned aspects, it is also relevant to note that, for some interviewees, the nature of both digital and print journalism have remained the same. Therefore, although the environment has changed, the essence and traditional tenets of journalism remain the same:

Despite the substantial changes in digital journalism, I believe that the essence of journalism has not changed. It requires the ability to prioritize, to investigate and to transmit content with ethics, honesty and credibility. (N36)

Use of Social Media to Foster Digital Journalism

The majority of our respondents acknowledged that social media is a key tool to maintain conversations with readers and to obtain potential relevant information about social reality. In addition, conversations using social media allow our respondents to know

readers' perceptions about the value, quality and informative power of their news production. An online newspaper coordinator explained: "now we can be close to readers. In social media, we know what they read, what they don't, what they are interested in and what they are not interested in" (L11). Echoing this perspective, a national journalist stated: "the relationship with readers has changed because now we can know what excites them and be focused on that. That is something positive that social media has brought" (N39). A local journalist even gave her WhatsApp number to a potential source in order to have a closer relationship:

[social media] has allowed me to get closer. It's easier to know the public and get closer to their reality. My strategy is always to build trust with the reader and give them even my WhatsApp number. Conversations are purely professional and thus are very positive. (L6)

These conversations allow our interviewees to grasp social reality and be informed about potential news about areas, neighborhoods or communities across Ecuador. An online newspaper journalist explained:

We maintain more direct contact with our readers through social media and that is a great advantage. We receive complaints about the things that happen in neighborhoods, and this helps us to go directly in search of the problems and try to solve what our readers need. (L8)

Social media thus changes the access to news sources, turning them into a key channel for understanding, knowing and being aware of crucial social forces that shape social reality. Moreover, an online journalist provides descriptive insight into the relevance of social media for journalism in Ecuador, addressing the key role in disseminating news contents not covered by news organizations:

The relationship with readers on social media is extremely valuable. Recently I had a strong personal issue, my dad got sick, and, at *Hospital del Seguro* where we were, a million things were happening. First, as a son and second as a journalist, you realize that things are wrong. I could not put this in the newspaper, but I opened a thread on Twitter telling this story and you have no idea how many people reacted, you find that feedback. It seems to me that the media in Ecuador has a major shortcoming in that it is far away from the public, it still looks down on them; but social media brings you closer. (R14)

Discussion

Social media platforms have been developed by Western societies, and they have a huge impact on readers' news consumption patterns and the way in which news organizations produce and disseminate content all around the globe (Matsa and Shearer 2018). However, even in a networked global world-system (Wallerstein 2004), central technological and cultural initiations can affect world regions differently, depending on their geopolitical positions and attitudes towards the global center (Chase-Dunn 1999). Our analysis aims to further existing studies on the potential effects of social media use on journalism practices, emphasizing the distinct role of global South communities and, specially, Ecuador. As a result, our findings might challenge or nuance central scholarship, illustrating how pull (systemic) and push (antisystemic) attitudes influence journalism practices in a country with a peripheral position and a traditional antisystemic polity (Chase-Dunn and Morasin 2013). Based on interviews with 40 Ecuadorian journalists from different news

organizations throughout the country, we provide four contributions to this line of enquiry.

First we consider the systemic (pull) processes that favor Western values and ideologies. Pull processes could be either global phenomena that are inevitable at the periphery, or they can be chosen processes developed as a result of positive attitudes towards Western values. Generally speaking, we found that there are two important global features that cannot be avoided at the periphery, regardless of attitudes towards central values. The first is the global financial crisis and other contextual factors (especially politics, history and violence) that have had a great effect on the profession worldwide (Kroknes, Jakobsen, and Grønning 2016), including journalism in Ecuador in particular, and Latin-American journalism in general. The second set of phenomena consists of the effects of technological developments that have been initiated in the West, but which have since spread all over the world. As we will later illustrate, the Internet in general and social media in particular have two inherent features: immediacy, and the dominance of visual information. Thus, both at the center and the periphery, Internet penetration and the growing relevance of social media platforms go hand in hand with the acceleration of news consumption and news production (immediacy), and with the increasing importance of visual content over traditional written communication.

Besides globally determined phenomena such as technological change and financial crises, we also found a development of pro-Western attitudes that are based on deliberate professional decisions. One of the most important findings of our study is that Ecuadorian journalists prefer the Western value of a free press over the more typical Latin-American situation where there is significant political pressure on media outlets. As many of our interviewees emphasize, the many challenges facing journalism in Ecuador are related to other dynamics that shape the political, economic and historical situation of the country. Specifically, the struggle for freedom of the press, freedom of speech and the key role of the state in setting the agenda, are all crucial in understanding how news-workers make sense of their role in society. Similarly, although not specifically referred to or broadly discussed by our participants, self-censorship, due to fear of reprisal or violence, is a determining factor that explained the mental processes and configuration that shape the ways in which reality is reported by journalists. Therefore, material conditions and potential violence are differential factors in many countries in Latin America, although much less intense in the Ecuadorian reality, as our respondents acknowledged.

It is also important to highlight the existence of an Andean imprint that influences how Ecuadorian journalists interpret their professional practice. From a cultural point of view, this is illustrated in the traditional indigenous orientation of Ecuadorian news-workers, mainly in two domains: news content (as sources and main characters of the news pieces); and storytelling (i.e., indigenous narrative). As many interviewees explained, examples of both can be found in the "*crónica*" [feature article] genre, following the school created by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and the focus on local folkloric nationalism. This is generally also observed in all of Latin America, although much more characteristically in the culturally-similar countries that make up the Andean Community of Nations (Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia). This traditionalism leads Ecuadorian journalists to prefer classical Latin-American journalistic genres, as well as local rhetorical style over European rationalism and rigidity—as one of our respondents called it—is the most important antisystemic feature of Ecuadorian journalism. This antisystemic attitude

could also be justified by the fact that our respondents indicated other, typically semiperipheral Latin-American countries as role models in journalism, instead of celebrating classical European or other central journalistic practices as those of the BBC or CNN.

Secondly, the main effects of social media on Ecuadorian journalism are the immediate news production and the dissemination that they trigger and in relation to the transformations in journalistic practice and professional profiles that they give rise to. First, our findings address a crucial insight for understanding how journalists make sense of the impact of social media in Ecuadorian journalism: a change of paradigm in which the immediate nature of news becomes the norm in the new digital landscape. As was already mentioned, this acceleration of news production and news consumption is the direct consequence of the technology itself. Accordingly, it is a systemic and global phenomenon that affects every region—central and peripheral—using the technology. Our findings emphasize how journalistic routines are transformed and news production is enriched through the opinions of readers and interactions with them on social media. Social media is a fundamental tool for structuring the news production process of most news organizations, in which the micro elements (social contact, local information, direct relationships, etc.) of news production determine in many cases the relevance and breadth of news content. However, at the same time, the immediate nature of news on social media and the lack of control in news verification open the door for the growing dissemination of fake news. The biggest challenge addressed by our respondents in relation to the impact of social media on journalism is, therefore, associated with the emergence of fake news and the obstacles it poses to creating an informed society.

In this regard, many of our respondents provided examples of the distorted effects that fake news triggers in the interpretation of public affairs and politics. This impact was a fundamental and a shared concern among the majority of our interviewees, highlighting the need to revive traditional journalistic practices associated with the production of verified, reliable information regardless of the dissemination channel. Similarly, the immediate orientation of most news organizations and the inclination to rapidly cover potential breaking news present journalistic challenges that might tempt many new workers to fall into sensationalism as well as compel many news organizations to focus more on counting likes, readers and comments than on the quality of the content itself. Therefore, while social media is arguably a crucial tool for structuring journalism in Ecuador, it can also contribute to the dissemination of fake news and a new wave of sensationalism.

Thirdly, it is important to note the change in the professional profile of Ecuadorian journalists due to the emergence of social media. When planning the interviews for this research, little interest was expressed by media company executives. This indicates an obvious lack of knowledge about the effects of digital society on their organizations. They defend the analogue system and do not have employees specialized in or even capable of adapting to this new reality. On a more positive note, the average age of journalists is low, making them digital natives, and they enjoy cutting-edge study curricula in university faculties of journalism and/or communications in Ecuador. This makes the adaptation process as well as the use of language and metalanguage a short-term growth opportunity. According to several of the journalists interviewed, the use of social media should be exploited in Ecuador in order to focus on the development of local and impact journalism: direct content with sources and audiences should be seen as an added value, with a hyper-segmentation of content anchored in cultural and current events.

As a fourth contribution, we provide a world-systemic explanation of how Ecuadorian journalists react to technological and cultural globalization. In line with our considerations above, we distinguish between systemic (pull) and antisystemic (push) effects, and our first research question was directly related to the attitudes of Ecuadorian journalists towards these pull and push effects. Based on our empirical analysis, we found that, although Ecuador is considered to be a peripheral country with an antisystemic polity, systemic processes are more typical in Ecuadorian journalism than their antisystemic counterparts. Our explanation of this fact is based on the recognition that news-workers are, both technologically and economically, working in an increasingly global context. Peripheral journalists have no choice when they have to adapt to global financial crises and technical revolutions like the development and the global spread of the Internet. Journalism today is based on new technologies to such an extent that it cannot be insulated from their consequences, the most important of which are immediacy, interactivity and the growing importance of visual content. But besides systemic movements, we can also find very important antisystemic attitudes through which Ecuadorian journalists resist the central impact and try to keep their autonomous professional culture. Ecuadorian journalists are proud of their Latin-American tradition, their notable writer/journalists like Vargas Llosa or Gabriel García Márquez, and when it comes to role models, they refer to other Latin-American countries instead of to central (European or American) examples. Moreover, they prefer the Latin-American writing style and Latin-American genres. Finally, they also prefer topics and themes with a local relevance over global issues, thus following traditional discourses on folkloric nationalism.

Our second research question was related directly to the effects of social media on the balance of systemic and antisystemic attitudes in the case of Ecuadorian journalists. We found that social media, as a technically determined phenomenon, defined how media sites are used by both journalists and audiences. This means that news production and news consumption have become faster (immediacy), user-generated content has become less reliable, and thus professional journalists have had to change the focus of their role from gatekeepers to “information confirmers”. Similarly, the rapidly growing role of interactivity between journalists and audiences and the increasingly important role that pictures play in news content are direct consequences of the technical capability of the Internet. Thus, regardless of the geopolitical position or the world-systemic attitude of a given world region, the ways in which social media sites impact journalistic practices are rather similar, because they are the direct consequences of the medium itself.

In summary, we can conclude that, while the spread of global technologies make it harder and harder to launch antisystemic movements, they mostly affect how journalists use modern technologies. Meanwhile however, peripheral journalists are still able to maintain many indigenous features like style, rhetoric and the content of news. We can thus say that technological innovations like social media sites cannot affect professional practices equally in all the regions of the world, thus the analysis of different world regions is still crucial in order to gain a clear picture of the world-system.

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